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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TASHKENT 001865

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TAGS: [MARR](#) [MASS](#) [MCAP](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [UZ](#)
SUBJECT: LONG-AWAITED MEETING WITH DEFENSE MINISTER

REF: TASHKENT 1855

Classified By: CLASSIFIED BY DEFENSE ATTACHE LTC J. HARTMAN FOR REASONS
1.4 (B, D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: On 16 October 2007, the Ambassador, the Defense Attache (DATT), Defense Attache Office (DAO) Operations Coordinator (OPSCO) and DAO FSN, met with the Minister of Defense Ruslan Mirzayev. This is the first time that Mirzayev himself has received U.S. representatives since January 2006. This visit was significant as part of the re-establishment of the Uzbek MOD's relationship with the U.S. Government, as well as demonstrating Mirzayev's full-time return to his duties as Minister. For the past two years, contact between the MOD and USG has been maintained at more junior levels and for ceremonial purposes. Mirzayev reportedly suffered a heart attack in May 2007 and was not seen in public until August 31, 2007. DATT contacts explained that rumors of Mirzayev's impending retirement and replacement continue within the Uzbek Government (reftel). End summary.

¶2. (C) Mirzayev was well-prepared for welcoming the Ambassador, stressing Uzbekistan's appreciation for past cooperation with the USG. Mirzayev began by thanking, at great length, the U.S. for its military cooperation with Uzbekistan throughout the 1990s when Uzbekistan was establishing the Uzbek Armed Forces and the Ministry of Defense (MOD). Specifically, he thanked the U.S. for its help establishing the NCO Corps and academies, all the programs conducted with the Ministry of Emergency Situations (MES), and other programs and training, including search and rescue operations and non-proliferation of weapons and radiological matter. He noted that the bilateral relationship peaked during when the U.S. had a presence at the Karshi-Khanabad airbase. He expressed interest in renewed cooperation "in order to meet the unrealized potential of our cooperation."

¶3. (C) Deputy Defense Minister Colonel Rustam Niyazov attended the meeting, though uncharacteristically was not in uniform. Izmat Faizullaev, the U.S. Desk Officer from the MFA, also attended the meeting, along with Mirzayev's personal assistant and MOD's Desk Officer for the Americas. Notably absent was Colonel Farkhod Rustamov, the MOD Chief of International Military Cooperation. Faizullaev's attendance is the second time in a row at a U.S.-Uzbek MOD official discussion. (Comment: Faizullaev's attendance is welcomed by the USDAO, as it ensures better MOD-MFA coordination. In

earlier meetings, MOD stalled on issues, claiming to require consultation with the MFA. Previously, it was common practice for an MFA official to attend meetings between senior MOD and USG officials. End comment.)

AIRBASES

14. (C) Responding to a question about access by U.S. members of the NATO International Staff or ISAF to the German-Uzbek Airbase in Termez, Mirzayev said Uzbekistan was ready for other nations, including the U.S., to join the "framework" of agreements that it shared bilaterally with Germany on the air bridge at Termez and rail transit across Uzbekistan. However, he added cryptically that such agreements must be part of Uzbek legislation. Mirzayev claimed that two years ago the GOU offered the same to NATO, but the issue went unresolved. On the specific U.S. request for the transit of official visitors through Termez with the ISAF Commander and for USDAO access to the Termez Airbase, Mirzayev thought such simply needed to be coordinated with the German Government and the GOU. Faizullaev contacted Polchief later that day and expressed optimism that this could be arranged.

15. (C) Later in this discussion, Mirzayev stressed the Uzbeks' appreciation that the U.S. always complied with the rules and lived up to its obligations when the U.S. used Karshi-Khanabad Airbase. (Comment: When asked about Mirzayev's remarks, the German Defense Attache in Tashkent commented that German authority at Termez is not as powerful as Mirzayev claims. The German Attache said the last time he was at the base, he was delayed more than a half hour at the gate by Uzbek authorities because the German diplomatic

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vehicle he was in had not been properly cleared by the Uzbek authorities to enter the base. End comment.)

USCENTCOM VISIT

16. (C) The Ambassador mentioned the possibility of a visit at some point by the Commander of USCENTCOM, which had been broached informally with the MFA. Surprisingly, Mirzayev stated that he was unaware of the possible visit. Niyazov did not react to this subject.

HUMAN RIGHTS

17. (C) The Ambassador touched on human rights during his comments. Mirzayev, prepared to respond to the topic, immediately countered with "We believe that we have made enough progress in human rights" and that Uzbekistan's advancement in this area was "unprecedented" over the last 15 years. He stressed that the most important human right was security, noting that walking the streets of Tashkent was safer than walking the streets of Almaty and many places in Europe. Mirzayev stressed that it was an important human right to be able to go outside your house. Mirzayev dismissed international reports on human rights, pointing out that some incorrectly (sic) rank Afghanistan higher than Uzbekistan.

THE UZBEK ARMED FORCES

18. (C) Mirzayev hailed Uzbekistan's efforts against abusive hazing in the MOD, especially compared with the Russian Armed Forces. Mirzayev claimed the Uzbek Armed Forces have not had a desertion in three years, noting that conscripts fill only 30 percent of the slots within the Uzbek Armed Forces and competition is fierce. He explained the Armed Forces established a goal around 2004-2005 to move completely to a volunteer armed forces and that the GOU's plan is progressing well. The minimum pay for conscripts, he pointed out, was 50

USD per month and for initial contract servicemen it was 100 USD per month. (The average monthly salary in Uzbekistan is around 50 USD.) After the mandatory one year of military service, conscripts are permitted to leave or apply to re-enlist, but face tough competition.

¶9. (C) Comment: DATT contacts corroborated these statements, pointing out that parents now pay bribes to get their sons into the military for conscript service and that conscripts are also paying bribes to be eligible to sign contracts at the end of their mandatory service. This is due to poor economic opportunities in Uzbekistan, the relatively high minimum pay standards and comparatively good working conditions in the Uzbek Armed Forces. End comment.
AFGHANISTAN

¶10. (C) The Ambassador re-stated the U.S. invitation for the MOD to send delegations to visit the Manas and Bagram Airbases in early 2008; Mirzayev did not respond or even acknowledge the topic, although the MOD showed interest in the idea in August 2007. Mirzayev changed the topic to his KGB service in the mid-1980s in Mazar-e Sharif, General Dostum, and past discussions with U.S. General Tommy Franks about northern Afghanistan. Mirzayev lamented the difficulties in forming a unified Afghan. He stressed Uzbekistan's potential interest in commercial opportunities in Afghanistan. (DATT noted that at one point, Mirzayev made an interesting admission that he had personally witnessed some of the bombardment of the Mazar-e Sharif area of northern Afghanistan in fall 2001.)

¶11. (C) Comment: As with the lack of response to the U.S. Ambassador concerning the invitations to Manas and Bagram, Mirzayev also chose not to speak further about General Dostum even when prompted, although he acknowledged the Ambassador's reference to Dostum as someone who had helped the Coalition topple the Taliban. Mirzayev is believed to have a personal relationship with Dostum and was one of the facilitators of U.S. discussions with Dostum in 2001. End comment.

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¶12. (C) Mirzayev ended the meeting by stressing the GOU's desire to improve bilateral relations. He said the GOU "does not love large security organizations" and instead is more comfortable working within bilateral arrangements based on mutual respect.

MIRZAYEV'S HEALTH

¶13. (C) Mirzayev was eloquent, lively and jovial at times, and moved around well, although he coughed often during the discussions. The DATT and DAO FSN noted that he had grayed remarkably, had circles under his eyes and had lost weight since early 2006. DATT and DAO FSN noted that Mirzayev looked far older than his age of 42. Mirzayev is believed to have suffered a heart attack in May 2007. He was out of public view from mid-May to very late August and worked just part-time for much of September although he did lead a delegation to Pakistan.

¶14. (C) DATT contacts have stated that rumors persist at both the MOD and the MES that General-Major Berdiyev will soon replace Mirzayev. When questioned about how these rumors had continued for two months, the contacts pointed out that it took four months for Mirzayev to officially replace former Minister of Defense Kodir Gulamov in November 2005, even after Gulamov was dismissed in July 2005. The contact added that the matter was now in the hands of the Oylis Majlis, the Uzbek "rubber-stamp" parliament, which seldom convenes.
NORLAND